

COINS

Weight test separates the real from fake

By Roger Boye

This week's column answers more questions from Tribune readers.

Q—After buying three types of gold Krugerrands, I read that a few counterfeit South African coins turned up in New York. How can I tell the difference between a phony and the real thing?—T. D., Chicago.

A—Investors who buy Krugerrands [or other coins] from reputable dealers and bankers need not worry about "being taken." But to be sure your coins are real, have an expert weigh them on a sensitive scale and measure their specific gravity. Test results for genuine coins must be within certain "allowable limits."

Q—What effect does toning have on the value of uncirculated coins? I own some silver dollars with beautiful mint luster, and also some with toning spots that make the coins look almost dirty.—T. J., Lake Forest.

A—Toning is the result of a natural aging process called oxidation. Silver dollars that tone evenly on both sides often are worth more than coins with bright shines; dark blue or yellow tones take years to develop as the metal gradually reacts with elements in the air.

But small black spots of oxidation decrease a coin's "collector value." Most often, they form several months

after dirt or droplets of spit and sweat come in contact with the metal.

To help prevent the small, ugly spots from forming, store your rare-date uncirculated coins in air-tight holders made of inert materials. And don't finger or breathe on the coins as you put them in the holders.

Q—I want to know when silver was taken out of U.S. coins and from what coins. I know you've published this before, but I've misplaced my copy.—E. B., Kankakee.

A—Dimes and quarters made in 1964 or earlier contain silver; those minted since 1965 do not. Half-dollars dated 1964 or earlier each contain .36 of an ounce of silver; those made from 1965 to 1970, .15 of an ounce; those minted since 1971 have no silver.

Uncle Sam produced some silver coins for the Bicentennial in 1976 and sold them to collectors in special holders. Bicentennial coins found in circulation are made with nickel and copper, not silver.

Q—While looking through my Lincoln cents, I found a 1980-D showing Lincoln with a doubled mouth. Does it have any value?—Y. B., Carbondale.

A—Most likely, the "die" that made the front side of your coin cracked along Lincoln's mouth, creating the double image. Markings formed by small die cracks are relatively common; a collector of coin errors might pay \$1 for your cent.

Want to know how much your old coins or dollar bills are worth to a collector? Send your questions to Roger Boye, Arts & Books, Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Av., Chicago, Ill. 60611. Enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you want a personal reply.